

Manari Olembo

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "James MacDougall".

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Without a sound, or sign of interest, a man pointed to a plain door marked only 'OFFICIAL PERSONNEL ONLY.' Despite several muffled voices coming from within, Manari Olembo's first knock was not answered. He knocked again and there was still no answer. He turned and looked at all the men scattered on the benches across the corridor. None of them were paying attention. As he started to knock again the door swung open before his fist landed, but only so far that the man's head and torso could be seen.

Suddenly, the benches cleared and the men rushed the door. Twenty men, pushing and shoving and yelling--packed so tight those caught in the middle probably could have left the ground and been held up by the pressure of the others pushing in on them. Some waved their arms in the air trying to get the attention of the official, and wouldn't get them back down again because there was no room. Manari was pushed to the front directly in the face of the man who had opened the door.

"I am looking for Mr. Wanjiru, the port manager," Manari yelled above the din, and waited for a reply. The two men stood inches from each other. The man paused for a moment while the commotion stirred, staring at Manari with no intention of answering him. The official told the crowd to sit back down, and shut the door promptly.

Manari was surprised to see everyone meander away. Most of the men returned to the benches, but some remained standing, leaning up

against the wall which held the door. He would not give up so easily. He knocked again. No answer. Then again, shortly. The same man appeared, saw Manari's face and started to slam the door shut. Manari slid his foot between the door and the jamb.

"You don't understand. I have an appointment with Mr Wanjiru." He yelled through the crack. The door swung open.

"No. You don't understand. When we are ready to see you, you will be let in." Again, they stood apart, staring at each other. Manari saw the man look down at his foot pressing against the doorjamb and he could feel his position failing. The whistle from the steamer blew long and hard.

"Unless you move your foot immediately you will never see Mr. Wanjiru." Manari slid his foot away, and the door slammed in front of him.

Manari turned around and leaned his back against the door. The men sat comfortably on the benches--some smiled at him. He was confused. They seemed content. He took a seat on the middle bench directly across from the door, looked down the corridor and watched the boat slip away from the port. Taking inventory of his company he wondered how many of the others had also come for the job on the steamer. He waited on the bench with eagerness that soon died with the long, failing passing of the

morning. During each of the five following weeks he would spend a similar day off work.

* * *

The darkness of the room slowly relinquished itself to the rays of the rising sun shining through a lonely window in the stone wall high above the level of sight. The room was like so many others in this southwest corner of Magu, and it was home to Manari Olembo. Surrounding it were thousands of other homes, some large enough to be partitioned by other stone walls, some supporting families as large as seven or eight. These homes were set in endless hillside mazes clustered so tightly the donkeys could not pass the streets without scraping the dust from their hides on the coarse mud and stone of the homes. Manari awoke restlessly and looked through blurry eyes at the stark bright square of white light on the opposite wall where a gecko scurried toward the holes between the wall and ceiling. The light cut only a streak through the room leaving the rest in a slightly fainting grey.

As Manari rolled onto his back his arm swung hard against the wall. "Damn." He threw himself back over on his stomach. His feet stretched past the wooden frame of the bed and rubbed the mud between the stones in the wall, his left arm swung down to the floor, and his right hand lay

with the palm flat against the wall at the head of the bed. He looked across the room and cursed the walls. Only since yesterday, they seemed to have shrunk. At once, he pushed against the facing walls at opposite ends of his bed with his hand and feet, then curled back in anger.

He sat up. His feet were on the morning's cool mud floor. Save for that ray of light, all he could see was the uncertain outlines in grey of the objects in his room. He listened to the sounds in the street of the town awakening. In a step he was across the room. He grabbed his shirt from its peg on the opposite wall. He slipped it over his body, buttoned it, and pulled the handle of the door to the street.

He was tired. The day before had not been a particularly hard one. It was as all the others had been, but then to Manari that was the most tiring aspect of the days-- they were all the same, the same as they had been for 13 years. From sunrise until nearly sunset everyday he put in his hours in the tea fields. Hour after hour Manari hoed the field and cut away the grasses. He had probably walked a thousand kilometers through the same rows of tea plants, and he was stepping on the same earth that had been walked by generations of Magu's citizens. Each day the town seemed to uproot itself and move two kilometers across the river. In the evening,

after the work was finished, they would make the return trip to town.

The next morning the cycle began again.

Little opportunity was available in the country, but there was always room for working in the tea fields. This is where most of Magu's people made their living. The tea fields were one of the pleasures of the country's landscape. The deep green tea plants rolled as gently as the sea to the horizon. Beautiful as they were, they were the setting for the toil of many men. Thirteen years of working here had numbed the fatigue and soreness of Manari's muscles, but he had not gotten used to the time passing him by.

As Manari walked toward the field with the others he stopped on the bridge and watched the river flowing under the wooden rafters.

Relentlessly, the water rushed along through the supports of the bridge-- the pressure never releasing. Looking closely he could see the ruts where the water had worn away the wood. Cracks had formed on the supports near the level of the water. Manari wondered how long the bridge would be able to stand up to the never-ending force of the river. The bridge creaked as he stepped off.

Instead of heading to the fields this morning Manari was going to take a bus to the Magu Port to try to find a new job. He had gained a

connection at the station through a friend of his father. A folded piece of paper in his pocket listed the name Mathenge Nkrumah above the title Port Manager. He was counting on this connection as his ticket in. For the past five weeks he had spent his day off work at the Port. Five times he had tried to get in to see the station master, and five times he had failed.

The Magu bus station was at the crossroads where the bridge left town for the tea fields. The buses were packed into a corner of the intersection. The engines were revving and the horns were honking. It was all very noisy and exciting. They all acted like they were about to leave. Operators wandered through the lanes of buses trying to pick up new passengers. This show went on for hours, but no bus ever left Magu before it was full. The bus for Magu Port was not yet half full, so Manari had some time before he needed to leave.

He sat to talk with Ngoyo, an old man known to almost all citizens of Magu. He did not go to town much. He stayed away, preferring the clean life in the countryside. He gathered fruits from trees in the valley and sold them here to the people working in the fields. Everybody knew Ngoyo and everybody liked him. Hot days in the field were welcome for his business. The space around Ngoyo's blanket of fruit was a frequent spot for conversation, discussion, debate, and argument over the affairs of

Magu and the rest of the country. He was as steady and trustworthy part of Magu as the tea plants themselves.

"Sasa, Manari? Need any bananas this morning?" Most of the crowd had already left for the fields.

"No thanks. I've only got money for the bus."

"Going to the port again?"

"Yeah. I am hoping to get in this time."

"He's a hard man to reach."

"Yeah." Something inside caught Manari's thoughts. "But I have to keep trying. You know what this job means to me. You know better than anyone that I hate working the fields. It drives me crazy. Day after day, the same routine. I don't see how everyone else can stand it."

"Because it feeds them, Manari. And it feeds their families, and yours, too. It's not so hard to understand people trying to keep food on their tables, I don't think."

"Oh, don't give me that. I'd risk all of it to get a job on the steamers. To find something to take me away from this place."

"Don't let your dreams carry you too far away. You have a job and a family and food and friends. You're not so unlucky as you make yourself believe."

"You were the one that took me down by the river when I was young, when I had just started working in the fields. You remember?" Manari gave Ngoyo a glance. "You showed me the moon. I looked up at it and you told me all about the other places where it shines. 'It is the same moon you can see everywhere,' you told me. The places I imagined. For those moments I didn't feel like I was sitting in Magu. Now, I can look up to the night sky and leave this place for a few hours. But the hours aren't enough anymore, Ngoyo. I want the days, too." He sat with Ngoyo. "Time is moving along for me. I have to jump out in front of it, so it doesn't catch me. I'm going at it full steam, Ngoyo. Nothing can stop me. I feel so full inside. I can't hide my passions in the swing of a panga anymore."

"Why do you want to leave so badly? Those were stories, Manari. You were young then."

"This job means I can break this routine, this path leading me nowhere. I can go places and see new things. I'll have the opportunity to make something more of myself than keeping the weeds out of a field." He turned and pointed to the fields. "Look at those people, Ngoyo. You have been here fifty years. Do they look any different now than they did fifty years ago?"

"What difference will a routine aboard a boat make from a routine in the field?"

"Routine? But it won't be. It will all be new. The places I'll see."

"In time the water will look as old as waves of tea leaves."

"You are too poetic."

"Well, you better get going. Your bus is about to leave."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow." Manari got up and walked toward the buses.

"You mean, if I don't fly off to the moon first."

Manari glanced back and caught Ngoyo's half-smile. He had waited too long and all the seats were taken so he would have to stand for the hour and a half that it took to travel the twenty-five kilometers to the port. The bus stopped frequently to pick up new passengers and let others off. Soon the bus was packed tight and the aisle was filled. Some people in the back had seats on wooden planks laid on the across the aisle. All the buses were packed like this one. Today it bothered him. Everybody packed in together, pushing on him. He wanted to move around. Thoughts of getting the job made him yearn for freedom, and he couldn't stand everyone pushing on him, trapping him in. He could barely shift his weight.

The road which had been tarmacked fifteen years earlier, would have been better off had it never been tarmacked at all. The tarmac only existed in islands now, and the bus kept to the side of the road. The dirt and gravel were much smoother. After ten kilometers on the road, the bus operator burst out in commands at the passengers.

"Sit down. Everyone down. On the floor." His orders were directed at those standing in the aisles. He waved his hand down frantically. It was all too much. The passengers were well acquainted with the routine. The bus was being stopped at a police checkpoint.

Smaller private cars moved through the pair of iron rows of six-inch spikes that lay twenty feet from each other on opposite sides of the road. One officer, with an automatic rifle strapped over his shoulder, walked around the outside of the bus. Another peeked his head inside the bus, looking around, counting the heads of those crouching down attempting to look as though they were seated. He stepped out again and around to the front of the bus. The operator followed him out and leaned with his back against the front of the bus.

Their conversation could not be heard from inside the bus. The officer said few words, and the operator said many. After a wait, the officer stepped closer to the bus so only his head and shoulders could be

seen. He barely held back a smile and then moved away again, slipping his hand into his pocket.

He smiled, and those in the front of the bus couldn't help letting out a laugh at the officer's smug look. The bus was waved on and the operator jumped back inside. As the bus pulled away Manari could see the officers walking to the truck stopped behind the bus. Almost immediately they disappeared beyond a cloud of dust. Another ten kilometers later and the bus was stopped again by the police. After a similar routine the bus was off again. Riding the buses had become a routine part of life for Manari. Could he have all the money he had seen passed along to the police he would have no need to go to the port today. They were a part of the same system-- trying to get ahead. And Manari hated the fact that he could feel a connection to the police and the bribes they took.

The bus stopped at the road to the port an hour and a half after it had left. Manari and a crowd of others alighted from the bus and walked the remaining kilometer to the river port.

Nearly every man waiting to get into the Port Manager's office bought a newspaper from the hawker who worked the station. Manari bought one and sat on a bench between two men. The typical articles were in the paper. The middle pages were filled with notices welcoming home

the President on his return from an overseas diplomatic visit. There was also a notice that required the fifty students named on page five to report back to their university to accept discipline for their involvement in the riots which closed the university two weeks earlier.

Today's headline was about a the murder of the Minister of State. The murder had actually taken place six months earlier, but the trial had just gotten under way a week ago. Ever since the announcement of the murder appeared in the newspaper it had been front page news. The President expressed his shock and anguish over the death of one of his top ministers. Then he demanded an inquiry. And everyone laughed at his ceremonial act of concern.

The proceedings had been very slow. Articles more often concerned the delays and hindrances of the case rather than the findings. The people had almost come to the point of apathy over the murder of one the more liked government ministers because the importance of the murder had gotten lost in the endless bureaucracy of the system. The paper reported every single word from the trial. Meaningless hearings were reprinted word for word. The headlines themselves seemed tedious.

"Can you believe this?" The man next to Manari leaned over and tapped his finger on the front page of Manari's newspaper. Manari didn't see what he was pointing to.

"What...," Manari began.

"What's got you, Martin?" The man on the other side of Manari leaned across Manari and finished his question.

"The detective heading the investigation refuses to hand over the findings of his team's work to anyone but the head of the State Department."

"Those are the proper procedures in case like this, Martin." The other man was leaning back behind his paper smiling, but continued the conversation. Manari did not know if he was supposed to be a part of the conversation.

"For god's sake, Seth, the man is dead! The investigation was about his murder. How can a dead man accept the results of an inquiry? This is ridiculous."

"Well, they could slip it under the door of his coffin. I'm sure he'd be damn pleased to find out what killed him," the second man was still behind his paper.

"You know as well as I what killed him. Who killed him. The whole damn country knows who killed him. It doesn't take six months of investigation to figure that out." The room fell silent. Manari hid behind his paper. Looks came from all around. The man next to him had gone back to reading his paper while the glances turned away. Shortly, he leaned toward Manari and continued his conversation in a hushed tone.

"Guess I better keep quiet. The only thing talk like that is going to get me is buried in the ground next to Bahati. But I won't be able to find out what killed me because I'm not the Minister of State." He laughed at his own joke. Manari tried to keep reading the paper.

"It just makes me mad. Having to put up with all the bullshit we do. Then when anyone tries to do something to change things he gets killed. You remember bishop Oseka, and Mwanzi? Same thing."

"Yeah." Manari acknowledged the man but did not want to get involved in the conversation. Today was not the day to fight the system. Today was the day to squeeze in. Manari looked over the top of his paper to see if anyone was still watching.

"It's never-ending. We're the same as we were twenty-five years ago. What job you got now? Same as your father had?" Manari nodded slightly once, and kept looking toward the paper. "I thought so. Me too.

See, we're not getting anywhere like this. We need a man to stand up and stop this corruption."

Manari kept looking at the paper, but couldn't read it anymore. The man had started him thinking about the government. He was right, the government was corrupt and the rest of the system, all the way to Mr. Wanjiru's office, followed the same pattern.

"But you see we've got stability." The second man said from behind his paper. The other man did not seem to hear. Manari turned and nodded at the back of the man's paper, then it dropped so Manari jerked his head forward again. The man continued. "If we were all running around trying to be heroes, we'd end up running into each other. Total chaos." Then, the first man picked up his conversation. Neither man could hear the other.

"You can't hardly blame a cop for taking a bribe when that's the only way he can get ahead. But that system will never change if we keep on accepting it."

"The strict system of privileges keeps us directed."

Manari looked around at the whole group of men who were trying to get into the office.

"I'll tell you the way to success here. Take what you can get, and step on anyone to get it."

"You just have to play the game."

All Manari wanted was to get through the system. Suddenly the whispers stopped and the two men jumped from their seats. They headed with the rest of the men to the door which had just opened. Manari was still caught in the conversation. Both men were right. Now they were both caught in the mass of men fighting to get inside. The combined energy of the crowd did nothing more than keep itself standing. Eventually, a man at the front of the pack was let in.

As the rest dispersed and rearranged themselves on the benches, a young man came into the corridor from the street. Throughout the day many would leave and others would come along to replace them. The young man was looking around and watching everyone. He looked as though he had not been to the port before. He walked over to Manari who was still seated at the bench.

"Can you tell me where the port manager's office is?"

"Yeah, it's through that door over there, but...."

"Thanks." He looked over to the door Manari pointed to, gave his quick thanks, and walked toward the door. Manari was shocked to be cut off and see him walk away. He dropped his paper to his lap and smiled at the young man's eagerness. He watched him. The young man knocked three

times before he got an answer, which was the head of the man in uniform and a quick, "Have a seat," before the door closed in his face. He came back over to Manari.

"How do you get in that office?"

"Just like the man said, 'Have a seat.'"

He sat down.

"But don't get too comfortable, or you'll be left behind when the scramble to get in starts again." Manari was interested in this young man who had walked in with a confident stride and expected to be taken care of. "My name is Manari. Yours?"

"Mwinyi. Nyamunga Frances Mwinyi. What's this all about? Are all of these people waiting to get in?"

"Yeah. It's kind of a slow day. There should be more to come by later. Wait until eleven, then the fight really gets going."

"What fight? Where's the line? I don't plan on being here until eleven."

"Why, the fight to get inside. And, there is no line, here. The only way to get in that office is to wait until the door opens, then try to push and shove your way to the front, yell out what you came for, and hope you get picked. You'll get in if you wait long enough."

"That's crazy."

"So, what's your business here?"

Nyamunga Mwinyi sat unhappily on the edge of the seat. He redirected his energies toward telling Manari about himself. The eagerness replaced some of the confusion in his face.

"I need to speak with Mr. Wanjiru, the port manager. I am supposed to interview for a job with him. I just graduated from Kenyatta University with an economics degree, and thought that I could work in this area of the country. I think I know my subject. I'm hoping that will get me the job."

"Hm. Did they teach you how to push an shove? That seems to be what you need to get in here. I've been trying for five weeks now and have had no luck. Every one of these men is trying to get into that office, and most are looking for a job. Some of them probably the same job you're looking for."

"None of them could have any sort of education in economics." He surveyed the group surrounding him.

"I don't think that matters. What they probably do have and what seems to matter is they know somebody or they've got more than lint in their pockets, and they don't mind parting with it."

"And you?"

"I've got a lead, a friend. The lint seems to have a monopoly on my pocket, though. I'm taking a chance. I want this so bad I'll do anything for it. And may have to. If I can get into his office then I think I've got a chance. It'll take some talking, but I think I can do it."

Nyamunga still had a confused look on his face.

"Relax. Here, read the paper." Manari handed him his newspaper.

As they both settled back a white gentleman walked straight into the corridor with the same confident stride Nyamunga came in with, and this time asked Nyamunga where the port manager's office was.

"It's through that door, but...."

"Thanks." Nyamunga was cut off, and the man walked to the door. Nyamunga was smiling. He knocked. It was answered, and after exchanging a few calm words with the man inside he was let in.

"How did he get in?" The smile disappeared from his face. The man who had been talking with Manari earlier was sitting on the opposite side of Nyamunga and was happy to answer the question.

"Are you blind, man? He's got the advantage. It makes me sick to see it. Everybody playing up to them. They've got what we want. They don't keep us from anything. We've got a government to do that. But it

just makes you sick to see someone have it so easy. Someone who can walk right through the system without having to deal with all the bullshit. I'd work my ass off to be able to get in there, and he has it handed to him."

"I'm going in." Nyamunga jumped up and headed toward the door.

"Wait...." Manari couldn't stop him, but sort of enjoyed seeing the spirit of fight in the young man. However vain it might have been, he rooted for him. He got the same treatment as he had before, only this time he was pushed away and told that he might not get in at all if he didn't sit down immediately.

"I can't believe this shit." He went back to reading the paper.

After a few rounds of the fighting at the door, Nyamunga was able to get to the front. Youthful energy was on his side, and he was taken inside. The episode with the young man had been a welcome digression for Manari. The morning had been dragging on long.

Through the corridor Manari could see one of the barges. It looked as though it was almost fully loaded. Men were still passing back and forth along the dock crossing the opening at the end of the corridor. A short time passed and Manari heard the horn of the steamer, and the barges slowly glided along the river and out of sight. The activities in the station peaked now and began to slowly die off. Soon the station seemed

rather empty, except for the occasional pair of workers meandering along the dock.

Nyamunga had not been inside long before the door opened again and a man was struggling to try to get Nyamunga out of the office. When the door had opened everyone had jumped and scrambled for the door. Manari was pushed to the front. Nyamunga was pushed out through the crowd as he yelled at the men inside. He kept calling them fools.

"Fools. You don't know what you're doing. I'm the only one here qualified for this job. Can't you see that?" He finally gave up and turned around and stomped out of the station. As Manari was watching Nyamunga over the crowd, he was grabbed and pulled inside the office.

The door shut. In all the confusion and thoughts about Nyamunga running through his head he had hardly realized that he had finally gotten in. Half of his battle was won. It took him a moment to regain his thoughts and begin taking in the scene. Two voices passing in a hallway leading out another door broke his spell.

"We have to be more careful with the college ones. You know that. This better not get back to me, or you'll be fighting to get in here just like the rest." Their conversation faded as they walked down the hall.

"Tssst. Hey. Tssst."

Manari turned across his left shoulder. A man was looking right at him and waving him to the side with the dart he held in his hand. Manari swung his head over the opposite shoulder and found himself staring directly into the face of a dartboard. He took a quick step, ducking unnecessarily, out of nervousness rather than need, out of the way.

He found himself standing at the end of one of two identical tables in the room. A door opened to a hallway that lead deeper into the station. Two filing cabinets stood in a corner. Several of the drawers were open at various lengths and the papers in the others seemed as easily accessible, slipping out between the slits and cracks. A clock hung out of the way above the filing cabinets. It came as close as any other clock in Magu to the correct time. The gears of the little round machine spun its hands and nobody cared.

Around the tables less than a dozen men were arranged.

"I'm looking for Mr. Wanjiru." To halt his spinning mind, Manari brought his thoughts back to the reason he had come. But he got no answer. He repeated the question.

"Do you play darts?" The man who had waved him off earlier called from behind.

"Uh...yes, but...I'm looking for Mr. Wanjiru." He took a step back and turned. It was not the response he wanted or expected.

"No. No. He's not around. Come on. I need a challenge. These fellas bore me."

"Losing all the time would bore me, too." A man commented from behind his paper.

"No. I really don't...."

"Hey, what's the harm?"

"Well, I'm looking for Mr. Wanjiru."

"I told you he's not around. What's the hurry?"

"Does anybody know where...." Manari turned back toward the men at the tables, but they all seemed more interested in the pending darts match than in Mr. Wanjiru.

"Yeah. He'll play."

"Go ahead, kid. You can take Ngege. All the rest of us have." A couple of men stood and started to lead Manari to the throwing line.

"But, I don't really...."

"Yes. Yes, you do." Someone pressed the darts into his hand.

"Ow!" One of the darts pricked the base of his palm. A speck of red blood came up.

He was at the line. A few men had pulled their chairs around behind the two men standing, holding the darts. Silence gave way to the ticking of the clock.

"Three-o-one, double in, double out." His challenger offered the match. "Closest to the bull." He threw and hit the outer bull.

As Manari threw the darts he was thinking about Mr. Wanjiru. Where was his office? Who were these men? A thought of Nyamunga ran through his head, then Ngoyo's face. Why was he playing darts? What does this have to do with the job? His concentration was running from him.

"You might finally have a win here, Ngege."

From the hallway a man appeared in the doorway.

"If Kumbia shows, Wanjiru wants to see him."

"Wait. Is Mr. Wanjiru in?" Manari shouted still holding his last dart.

"Yes, of course he is. He works here." The man, also in uniform, looked at Manari as though he had just discovered a part of the room which didn't belong.

"May I see him"

"No. He's busy. Have a seat outside. We'll call you."

"But I must see him. I want to ask about...." The man was gone. Manari stepped to the doorway and peered down the hallway. The man was disappearing into the darkness.

"Lets go, bwana. Take a seat with the rest." A man touched Manari on the shoulder and another opened the door. Manari could hear the scrambling toward the door of the men outside.

"Nobody's coming in. Go sit down," the man yelled at the men outside. From the other door, men could be heard moving down the hallway closer to the open door.

"...Mr. Wanjiru, tomorrow's load will be...." A voice came again from the hallway.

"Mr. Wanjiru!" Manari stopped against the pushing of his escort and yelled before he actually got turned around. Another man joined in and tried to hurry Manari out the door, but they were stopped by a voice from the hallway.

"Who called me?" In the hall, the man trailing stopped at the door. He was surprised and somewhat irritated to hear his name called out. He paused and looked around the room over the top of his glasses. All action in the room had stopped with the sound of his voice. All eyes in the room shifted from Mr. Wanjiru to Manari.

"Me, sir, Mr. Wanjiru. I want to talk to you about a job. I was given your-"

"Who sent you here?"

"Your cousin. Martin Wanjiru."

"Hmmm." His head swung back toward the hallway. "Have a seat outside. I'll call you in, later." There was more shuffling between Manari and the men.

"No. Mr. Wanjiru, please. I must talk with you." There was complete attention by all in the room. He had to say something to get in. "I can make it worth your while."

Suddenly, the ticking of the clock became audible. Eyes shifted between Manari and Mr. Wanjiru.

Mr. Wanjiru shoulders dropped and he let his body relax. "Send him to my office."

Smiles began to drift across the faces of the room, and whispers circulated. As Manari was lead down the hallway he could hear the room rise to a lighthearted buzz of jokes and slight laughter. The contagious smile may even have snuck in upon Manari's expression, but it would disappear. All he could think about was getting the job. He was in Mr.

Wanjiru's office now, and felt that most of the battle had been won. He was determined not to leave the office until the job was his.

Mr. Wanjiru's office was much like the room Manari had just left. It was similar in size, but had only one desk, which looked a bit more like it belonged in the room; it was properly arranged in the center. There were several papers scattered atop the desk. The same portrait of the President hung in the center of an otherwise bare wall behind the desk. A couch ran along one of the side walls. A ceiling fan turned as though the cooling of the room was not worth its energy. The window in the back was turned away from the sun, and only reflected light bounced into the room. The dull colors of the room were left an even duller grey. The walls could have been any of the walls in Magu, and for a moment Manari's mind slipped back to his own room.

Weeks of hopes had culminated when he entered the room. All the while Manari had seen the obstacles in front of him. For the next moments he was inside all of that. For once in his life the gears of the machine lifted, and left him where he wanted to be. All the restrictions and barriers of society circled outside. He had a chance. The blood in his veins was pumping again.

It was not long before Mr. Wanjiru returned to his office. As the door opened Manari rose from his seat and shook the hand of a smiling Mr. Wanjiru, as well as, the hands of two other men Manari had not seen before. Mr. Wanjiru offered Manari the seat from which he had just risen, and sat behind the desk. The others rested silently on the couch.

"What can I do for you, Mr. ?"

"Mr. Olembo, sir. A friend of my father had given me your cousin's name."

"Yes. Martin."

"Mr. Wanjiru, I am told that there is a job available at the port." Manari only got the blank stare of Mr. Wanjiru. Mr. Wanjiru found no interest in Manari who seemed like every other man who worked his way into his office. He didn't mind the feeling however. In his office, he was always in control. He knew that he had what those waiting wanted. "Working on the boats." Still no reaction. "Can you help me? I want the job very--"

"Can I help you? Why you know Mr...."

"Olembo."

"...Olembo, that jobs here in Magu are very difficult to come by, especially one as coveted as working aboard the steamers which take our

tea to market. The matter of an opening can not simply be taken lightly, that is, handed out to any man who makes it into my office. The man must have the proper qualifications. I have to know that he will be hard-working. I have to know that he will be," his eyes shifted for the first time to Manari's face who was hanging on every words. Mr. Wanjiru was the center of attention, and he could play his role of benefactor very well. "That he will be appreciative... that I do this favor for him." Manari could feel all of the barriers slipping back into the room.

"I can assure you of my hard work, sir. My record in the fields will prove that. My family has always been loyal to their work. Sir, I can think of nothing more that I want. It has been a dream of mine to work on the boats carrying the tea."

"Good, good. And, what of your appreciation, for my fulfilling this dream of yours?"

"Well, my father is a close friend of your cousin. Perhaps you have met on some a occasion." A hint of hope crept into Manari's voice.

"I can not recall at the moment." His eyes did not waver from Manari.

"They are good friends, and my father thought that you could help me."

"You know I am very willing to help a friend of my cousin, but you understand that it would not be good business for me to simply hand the position to anyone. You understand, Mr. Olembo?"

"Yes, but sir, I--"

Mr. Wanjiru turned to the man on the couch. "Are there others waiting for me?" Manari swirled in his chair quickly toward the man and thrust out a halting palm in his direction.

"Wait. Mr. Wanjiru," Manari's spoke as if he was reluctantly committing himself. "You know that I am appreciative." Mr. Wanjiru eased back in his chair confident that he was gaining the understanding of his guest. All of the tension in the room relaxed, except for Manari's. He edged closer to the desk, on the edge of his seat.

"I am willing to deal Mr. Wanjiru, but you understand I come from a very poor family like so many of the others in Magu, that grow up on the southwest. My father throughout his life has only known the same fields which I myself work now. The soil which he turned over, now I turn again. My mother walks the same rows of tea as your mother once did. Mr. Wanjiru, I have not the money for this job, but I have the heart and you have my word."

"Your plea is like the rest. You know as well as I that it would not be profitable for me to let you on without the proper requirements. As you see, in my position I hold responsibility for many." He looked around to the others in the room. "I can not let down those counting me. Your heart, Mr. Wanjiru, will do me no good. Now, if you have nothing further to show me, I have nothing further to hear."

Time was running fast for Manari. In his mind images of his father coming home weary from the fields fought with the flight of the steamers disappearing around a bend in the river.

"I can pay as I work." Inspiration struck. "I will work the fields for you, Mr. Wanjiru. If you keep open the job for only a month longer, I can earn my appreciation in the fields."

"But what of your other job to feed your family."

"That, you are right, I must keep. For the rest I can work at night under the light of the moon. You must have work for me." Mr. Wanjiru sat in thought staring above the heads of the men on the couch. He did not seem much interested. "One month." Manari leaned forward. "It will work."

The man nearest Mr. Wanjiru walked behind the desk and they spoke in hushed voices for a moment. Mr. Wanjiru nodded in consent to the man's

idea, and sat silent for a moment while the man returned to the couch. He turned back to Manari.

"I believe that there are some things you can help us with, Mr. Olembo. Understand that this a favor, and you shall fulfill your end. Come see me tomorrow."

Manari couldn't hold back the smile. And the smile could not help but push all the thoughts of the tea fields from his mind, and left the steamer shining brilliantly on the water. His spirits soared.

"Thank you Mr. Wanjiru. It will all be worth it."

* * *

"Swiiisshhh." The panga was suspended at the top of its arch. The sun shot a sparkling diamond on its tip before it swung down in a circle on to the floor of the grassy field tearing the weeds away and pulling up within a hair of the glistening neck of Manari Olembo. He had passed out in the fringes of the tea field in a world of silence unaware of the near-fatal cut.

The man with the knife held his heaving chest with his other palm. He was terrified by almost taking off Manari's head.

"Muruli! Muruli! Get over here!" He screamed out for help.

Muruli came, and several others followed and soon there was a small crowd rounding the body lying in the grass. Black sweating faces peered over each other at the man unconscious on the ground.

"Who the hell is it?"

"It's Manari."

"Is he alive?"

"Yeah. But he looks like hell."

"They been making him work extra?"

"That damn kid's been like that for the last three and a half weeks.

He's been working under the moon, too. He's damn lucky he hasn't been hurt before." The old lady was disgusted.

"God, I almost took his head off." The man was exhausted. He threw his panga into the grass and then collapsed to his knees beside it. He threw his head into his hands.

"You might as well have. He's gonna kill himself soon anyway. Damn fool." She walked away from the crowd cursing the air with her words and flailing arms.

"Can you wake him?"

A man bent over him and shook Manari's shoulders. "He's out."

Somebody handed down a ladle of water. Slowly he came to, but everything was still blurry, still swimming. He was sitting in the shade of the crowd. He couldn't make out the faces. It came to him; he remembered where he was. "I have to work. Only two days more." Thoughts ran through his mind. He felt for his panga. He found it and stood. The crowd moved backwards. He didn't see them. He raised the panga high into the air and came down with it. It struck straight into the ground, and he collapsed right along side it. Several men rushed in to help him.

"Come on, Manari. Let's go to the bridge." He was able to take three steps before passing out again. The men lifted Manari and carried him away across the field. They all were hot. Through the tears in their shirts beads of sweat could be seen rolling down the backs of the men.

Manari Olembo had been unconscious for the last hour in the cool shade under the grass. The heat drained him long before the hottest hours of the day. As his body was carried away on the arms of the others his mind was floating on the river steamer. His mind had slipped away to childhood dreams of places far away.

For the remainder of the day Manari lay at the bridge at the edge of the field trying to recover. The day neared its end. The sun drifted beyond

the hills of the tea fields tinting the spare clouds orange. Women walked toward the bridge with their heads bent forward against the strain of the kiondo of tea leaves thrown over their backs; the leather strap pressed into the skin of their foreheads. Men followed. Their pangas swung low in a loose grip. The tips sometimes edging a scratch in the earth. Soon all of the workers had sifted themselves out of the tea plants. They filed along the bridge where Manari rested against a post. Some gave him a glance. Some shook their heads. Some whispered to those behind them. Manari didn't notice any of it, and soon they had all passed back in to town.

Manari's knees were pulled in and he rested his mind in his palms. He felt his thoughts running away through the spaces between his fingers. The thoughts were spinning and spinning and spinning and he couldn't stop them. He held them in front of him and stood aside and waited and watched, but he couldn't control them. So he tried to grasp at them. He grasped and missed, again and again. They were always slipping away. He tried to look through the spinning blur to see what was in the middle, but he only caught glimpses before the blur filled in again. They kept spinning.

"It was a long day, huh?" Ngoyo was still bundling the few fruits left from the day. Manari was sitting near his blankets. Manari twisted

his head along his palms and looked to the side at Ngoyo, who was waiting for a look.

"There was much talk about you today. I hear you passed out." Ngoyo was trying to gain some reaction from Manari, something to tell him he was all right. There were long pauses.

"Yes." Manari spoke softly. "The day was very long." He was taking the pieces one at a time.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. Uh...just tired. I...." He lost the words, then the thought.

"Why are you doing this?" Ngoyo knelt down close to Manari. "For three and a half weeks you've been going from one field to the other. Don't you see what it's doing to you? You can't even think straight." He spoke slowly so Manari could take in the words. "You don't need to do this."

"It's for the boat. So I can work on the boat." Something familiar appeared in the center of the spinning thoughts. "I need to pay Wanjiru."

"You're going to destroy yourself first. Come on. Let me help you home." He stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. Waiting.

"No. I'm okay. Just two days. I'll be all right. Two days and I'm free." He smiled, and his head quivered as he lifted it. "I'm free."

Ngoyo took hold of Manari's arm and tried to help him to his feet.

"Let's go home."

Manari jerked his arm out of Ngoyo's grasp and pulled himself up with the bridge post in a stumbling hurry.

"I can help myself! I don't need you." He didn't look at Ngoyo until the last words. "I am going to the field." He grabbed his panga and began to walk away toward the field. Unsteady legs carried him from side to side and the panga swung carelessly with his left arm. Ngoyo watched him. He decided not to stop him.

The hours weighed the sun down below the hills. Ngoyo moved his aging body toward the clustered hills of Magu. Manari tried to grab glimpses of his spinning thoughts as he walked away up the road to the field.

* * *

The black edge of the night's dome rotated down toward the horizon, and the last daylight was fading. It was a little less than a kilometer from the bridge to the field Manari worked at night for Mr. Wanjiru. His debt was almost completely paid. The weather had been fairly good, so he had only missed a few nights.

Manari had almost reached the field in the stretches below the President's home. Concentrating on each step helped Manari gain some of his thoughts back. He walked slowly anyway since the road was marked with holes, cracks, and rocks.

Ahead, there was a steady rhythm of metal crunching the earth that broke the silence of his walk. It became more clear with each step. He slowed. He twisted and jerked his head in every direction seeking the noise. His heart was beating fast and hard. Manari came around a corner and found himself within ten meters of a dark shadow cutting the surface of the road. He could see the pick raised, a black silhouette against a starlit sky. Then it came down with the force of two hands. The man noticed Manari and scurried into the bushes behind him.

"Who's in there?" Manari took a step closer toward the man, but along the opposite side of the road. He didn't get any answer. He kept his eye on the bush and kept walking sideways along the road. "Who's there?" Still no answer. With a quick jerk he stomped toward the bush and yelled it. "Who's there?" And stepped back.

The man fell out of the bush. "Nobody. It's just me. Don't shoot nothing at me?"

"It's okay. There are no polisi here. Come out of there. Who the hell are you?" Manari was still stepping closer.

"Not the police? Why didn't you say so." He came out quickly, grabbed his pick-axe, and went straight back to digging the hole. His voice was scruffy and the swings were meek. He was old. Manari moved closer. His thoughts went back to spinning.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm digging a hole, blind man."

"What for?"

The man stopped and leaned toward Manari on the handle of his pick-axe. He folded his wrinkles into a smile and looked directly into Manari's face.

"I'm getting back at the damn polisi that I thought you was. Them and the whole government. See, everyday they drive back and forth along this road to the castle. And everyday they have to drive over these holes. Back and forth. Bump after bump. Throwing them around in the cab. Their fat asses bouncing off the seats. Flat tires. Broken axles." He loved what he was telling. "They come driving through here screaming and cussing cause the road is so bad and they just think its the weather. They're in for a hell of storm tomorrow. This here hole is going to be huge. Ha. Look

at it." He pointed to a small hole in front of him. "Sometimes the big officials come through in their fancy cars and the whole time I picture them in the back yelling and screaming at the driver. Sometimes, on my day off," he stretched his neck toward Manari and pointed into the darkness, "I hide in the bushes out there in the daytime so I can hear them bitching, and I just laughs." He was laughing now. Manari smiled too, then turned around without saying a word and took his mind to the field. As he walked away he could hear the metal crunching the earth, broken occasionally by the hearty laugh of an old man.

Manari entered the small plot through a narrow space between two bushes. It was out of sight from the road, and a patch of trees blocked the view from the President's home up the hill. Over the tips of the trees he could see the dome of light that hovered above the house. Two weeks ago Manari laughed at marijuana, Mr. Wanjiru's illegal business venture, being grown so close to government property. Manari felt some revengeful satisfaction against a government that had corrupted the system in his help in an activity that the government was trying to stop.

The night had brought back some energy to his body, but he was still feeling tired and sat to rest on a group of boulders to the side of the patch of land. He could not yet catch up with his thoughts. The solitude slowed

his mind, but there was still a blur. The familiar sight of the field gave him the comfort of a pattern to follow. He stared ahead. He saw the short green rows in front of him. Suddenly, they turned to flowing water and the plants carried a steamboat off into the trees. "No." He shook it out of his head. I need to work. Ngoyo's face broke in and out of the blur. "Go away."

He threw his panga on the dirt in front of him. He reached inside his pants pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches. The matches slipped off the plastic wrapping of the cigarettes and fell into a crack between the boulders, lost forever. "Damn." He didn't see where they fell. He pulled out a cigarette and then bent over to feel around the ground for the matches. The ground looked black. He couldn't see anything. He could feel the dirt and the sparse dried grasses, but no matches. He got down on his hands and knees and swept his hands along the space in front of the boulder.

"Where the hell is it?" He was frustrated. He swung his head toward the sky. Cloud cover had floated in overhead, and only a few stars were still visible.

"Where is the moon?" He thought and then said aloud. "Where the hell is the moon!" He jumped to his feet. It was gone. "Where?" He

questioned the silent night. He was furious. When the moon was out in Magu, it lighted the entire valley. Manari scrambled to his feet and turned in circles. He was looking in every direction. The sky was spinning--empty. He jumped up on the boulder and looked out to the horizon. He looked between the black lace of the tree branches. He peered around corners of the hills. The matches were buried in the rocks below his feet. His mind was spinning faster and faster. He pressed his hands against his skull and forced his eyelids closed to try to stop them but he could not no matter how hard he pressed. They wouldn't stop. Where is the moon? Where is the moon? He thrust his arms out full length to the side and raised his head with a vicious scream. His body was rigid.

He jumped down from the boulder. His heart was beating fast, and his eyes were wide with the whites. A final time he looked up to the sky to see if the moon had come back. It was all blackness, a void filling in with his own thoughts. Ngoyo's face. The steamboat. A police officer. A young man fresh from college. A dead bishop. A white man. A dartboard. Mr. Wanjiru. The President. The laugh of an old man. They all orbited in a chaotic sky. He crouched against the side of the boulder.

It was worthless tonight. He could not work. He could not do anything. He would finish tomorrow. He looked for the matches again, but

only briefly so he would not frustrate himself. He couldn't find them, so he picked up the panga and walked back toward town. On the way to town, he tripped in a hole in the road and an old man laughed in the brush.

He approached the town from the slopes of the hills that led into sprawling mazes of small stone homes. He moved slowly in and out of pathways toward the main road. As he came into the last alley there was a large crowd that blocked the way to the street. The crowd was active and there was commotion near the front, but Manari could not see over all the heads. He entered the crowd with the idea that he would pass through. He started to push his way through the crowd, twisting his body and taking the curses of the others. He just wanted to get home. He was afraid of the violence that usually happened when this many people got together. He did not need the confrontation.

He asked several men what was going as he came through the crowd, and he got several answers. One man thought it was a thief. Another thought there was a magic-man. Manari didn't care. He had come half-way through the crowd when a wave of shouting started at the front and rushed through the mouths of those around him before making its way to the back. He saw the crowd moving forward and away from him, then felt himself

being pushed along from behind. He was trapped in the middle, and he wanted to be free. The crowd funnelled in a rush through the street.

The numbers of people were beyond Manari's sight. Bodies were all around him, thrusting forward then falling back. People yelled, waved their fists, clung to their children. Some pushed forward to see what was going on. Others were trying to get away. And, everyone was stuck. The tide of the crowd slowed and began to turn violent. Everybody was screaming and yelling.

He could not stop moving forward or he would be trampled by those behind him. He tried to make his way sideways through the crowd. He almost stepped on a young boy who had fallen underneath the crowd. What were they all doing? Why was everyone here? Through the crowd he saw the man who had come to see the magic-man fall below the heels of the mob, and disappear below their stomping feet.

Manari could feel the machine cranking around him. He was caught. It was the same crowd that was in front of Mr. Wanjiru's office -- a mass of people pushing against each other. They were all scrambling on a wheel that someone had started long ago. And the only way to stay up was to run with the flow, and every step pushed the wheel faster around the shaft until you couldn't even see where you were going. The gears were flying --

relentlessly spinning a crude existence for its passengers. Mr. Wanjiru drove the wheels he rode. The white man was oblivious to the machine. He rode above it and looked the other way. The President drove the crank. Maybe he had started it. The college student had tried to jump into the middle of the machine, and was bumped off. They were all running to stand still.

He could see the whole crowd writhing and shaking. It was living. It was all he could do to keep moving. Only those in front had any idea where the crowd was headed. It seemed to Manari that he had been born spinning around on the same gears. For a moment in Mr. Wanjiru's office he felt himself lifted from the wheel. He had stood aside and watched it pass, and had thought that he was free from it. He hadn't noticed that he had been gently placed back on -- that he was still running. He had given control to the tea fields. He had given control to Wanjiru. Now, he had given control to the crowd. He wanted to get out.

Manari worked his way sideways through the crowd trying to move forward with the crowd. Finally, he came to the edge, tripped as he stepped out, rolled over once, took a foot on his back, and rolled off the street. He sat against the curb until he had rested well enough to walk home.

* * *

Along the river that runs through the countryside there is a steamboat that plies to and from the lush tea fields of Magu and the tea processing factories outside Tabora. The river meanders through valleys of rich green tea fields, pastures of swaying maize, and open fields with herds of roaming cattle watched by young Maasai boys. Giraffes sway gracefully across the plains to pick the leaves from the acacia trees that line the fertile soil along the river. In the grasslands near Tabora, gazelle bound over fallen trees. Flocks of many colored birds gather on a single tree, bounce down through the branches, drop and lift themselves in a light, fluttering crowd to the next tree, or maybe the same.

By day, the steamer carries its load of tea downriver to Tabora, and makes the return trip at night. On the deck of the boat workers shuffle in and out of rows of cargo with heavy burlap bags swung over their backs. The captain and assistants enter and exit the control room above. They check the equipment and keep the steady pace of the engine. From there, when they near Tabora every night, they can catch a beautiful sun spreading its colors over the hills as it sets for the night.

Below deck, the steam engine drummed loud through the corridors and shook the rotting wooden floor. The hall that led to the steam room

smelled of burning coal and the riverwater that leaked in below the wooden boards of the floor. An incandescent bulb swaying with the ship hung on a wire in the steam room. The only other light came during the day from a porthole cut in just below the eight-foot ceiling.

The heat from fire burned a glow on the small glass window in the door to the furnace. Manari opened the door and heaved a full shovel. The coal crashed inside and the heat blazed. He filled the shovel again and brought his arm back to throw in the coal. But he bumped his elbow on the wall behind him. "Damn." The dropped shovel heavily. Black coal scattered across the floor. He grabbed his blackened elbow with a blackened palm. Black streaks of coal dust were scratched into the scars on his arms. As he turned he saw the light from the porthole.

He stepped up on the crates he had placed below, stretched his toes to full length, and lifted himself with his fingers on the rim of the porthole to peek a look at the places passing by. As he looked out the steamer passed under a tall bridge. The support of the bridge passed near the porthole. The water rushed relentlessly against the wooden support. The boards looked weak next to the force of the water. Manari wondered how long it had been standing in the same place. He wondered how much longer it will hold up. He wondered if he would hold up longer . He wanted

to touch the wood to see how strong it was. He tried to shift his weight to one hand, but it was too much and he slipped, his heel kicked forward missing the crate and the boards of the crate broke under his fall. He lay on the ground and slept until the engineer of the slowing steamer came screaming through the corridor.